

SEPTEMBER 9, 1982

Our August prairie fire season waited until the end of the month for the first burn. Low bands of lightning filled clouds kicked off the trouble. Fire engines and livestock sprayers followed by enough onlookers to contain any size of fire rushed to the scenes. As is normal for a grass fire, it took a couple of more calls to regain control of the situation.

Once the fires start, we seem to have one of two every evening. The altitude of the Shortgrass Country is just right for lightning storms to pass too high for a rain and perfect for igniting grass fires. Three or four summers ago, the Mertzon Volunteer Fire Dept. answered 61 calls in August alone. The count on other departments that assisted was lost in all the excitement.

The one we had the other night, as far as I was concerned, wasn't as bad as the fires usually are. Like I told you a month ago, I am coming off a 41 year old corn cob pipe habit. I was so starved for a smoke that the longer I could stay on the down wind side of the blaze the better I liked it.

All that cedar and mesquite wood smoldering tasted plenty good after five weeks of nothing but the off draft from trash fires and secondhand cigarette fumes to recharge my old habit. At one time my lungs were inhaling so strong that the pressure effected the smoke columns. Fire fighters at a distance began to think a backfire had been set to control the blaze. Without realizing it, I collapsed both cheeks trying to take on enough smoke to last through the night.

Later I ran into another guy on the fire line that was quitting tobacco. I'm sure thankful that I wasn't as bad off as he was. He was wanting to fight fire. By that I mean he was in such a state of nicotine conniptions that he didn't want to put the fire out, he wanted to fall in and whip the fire to death.

I'd been worrying about him every since he'd told me he was going to quit smoking cigarettes. His wife and he run a busy meat locker plant in Mertzon. Every day of his life, he works at a cutting table surrounded by sharp knives and jagged saw blades and fierce grinders.

From what I've learned about nicotine withdrawal, I could swear in court that a butcher shop wasn't the place to recover. If there is such a thing as a safe place, the closest I can think of is a rubber glove factory. Anywhere beats a husband and wife team working with boning knives. However in the first weeks of my ordeal, I was no nervous that the biggest danger a 16-inch butcher knife could have caused me was dropping it on my big toe. Everything else was quivering and shaking too much to be cut by a knife.

Not many herders came to the first fire. The controlled burning projects in the spring must have dimmed their enthusiasm for fighting uncontrolled flames. City folks don't understand about one percent of what happens on a ranch, without us starting fires in one season and stopping fires in the next season.

I am a little shaky on the subject myself. In nine out of every 10 years, the question out here isn't whether to burn the grass, it's how to find the grass. Most of the time we are about 16 sprigs per section away from being completely out of feed. Before I learn to burn up old grass, I am going to have learn to ranch with the little bit we have

every year to go by on. Economic reality has a way of ruining lots ranch projects. By the time we get enough old grass burn. I'll be too old to strike a match.

Each afternoon the fire siren goes off in Mertzon. My friend the butcher can bare! keep his apron on for waiting for the regular run. sure know how he feels. Cedar bark burning doesn't match Kentucky pipe tobacco, but it sure beats fresh air.